

Purpose of Music in Biblical Times

The Bible mentions many uses of music including songs of praise, songs of victory, songs of mourning, and above all the Psalms. Dances were also a common music expression along with the combination of singing with instrumental music. During later times there was also a purely vocal music which prevailed for a period.

According to Ulrich, music played an important part in both the secular and the religious life of the Hebrews. Kings and other leaders of the people were customarily acclaimed in songs and fanfares, and very elaborate musical services in the Temple, described in the Bible, were important parts of worship. There are, for instance, descriptions in the Bible of an orchestra consisting of nine lutes, two harps, and a cymbal. In other parts there are accounts of all-women choirs combined with singing and dancing to the men's percussion accompaniment. Werner adds that the choir's repertoire consisted of psalms, canticles, and other poetic passages from Scripture, although it may have contained some noncanonical texts. The choice of psalms is said to have been determined by God's activities on the first seven days of creation, and the verses which allude to them.

Werner writes that "unique in the history of music is the firm belief in the purifying and sin-atoning power of the Temple's music, ascribed to both chant and instruments." "The music had to be free from blemish or fault, and avoided magical elements. Even the High Priest's garment had symbolism: (Exod. 28:34-35): "a golden bell and a pomegranate, round about on the skirts of the robe . . . and its sound shall be heard when he goes into the holy place before the Lord . . . " According to Philo and Josephus, the bells represented symbols of cosmic harmony.